

Japanese Survivor Support Groups: A Newly Emerging Phenomenon
by William Feigelman, Ph.D. and Beverly Feigelman, LCSW

American suicide survivors do not have to look very far to find support groups after a suicide loss. Thanks to the pioneering work of Iris Bolton, LaRita Archibald, Marilyn Koenig, Karyl Chastain Beal and others, American survivors can go to the web or to the suicide information clearinghouses like AAS, AFSP or SPANUSA and readily find one of the more than 300 SOS groups now available in the US; or they can seek bereavement help from one of the many general bereavement support groups like The Compassionate Friends.

Yet, in many other countries peer support groups for suicide bereavement are simply not available. We learned this from a recent trip to Japan, where unfortunately there are now only about 20 such groups in the entire country. Japan probably could use many more survivor groups than its present numbers, due to its relatively higher suicide rates. Dr. Yoshitomo Takahashi, Japan's leading suicidologist, has documented Japan's higher suicide rate of 24 per 100,000 compared to the US rate of 11 per 100,000. Thus, with a population of approximately 40 percent of the current US population, Japan and the US have virtually matching yearly totals of suicides, of approximately 35,000.

Japan's relative backwardness in offering peer support to suicide survivors appears to be swiftly changing, thanks to the herculean efforts of Mrs. Sachiko Tanaka. For many decades mental health professionals completely dominated the field of suicide bereavement in Japan, discouraging survivors from taking any initiatives to form their own self-help support groups. Then, just seven years ago, the first self-help survivor support groups emerged. Later on, a little more than three years later, Mrs. Tanaka, a housewife, lost her 31 year old son to suicide, four years ago. Since that time she has become an activist showing extraordinary leadership skill and compassionate caring in starting her own group. Now, many newly bereaved survivors find comfort in her group and in following her guidance as they attempt to establish their own support groups, either on the Internet or in other parts of Japan. In 2008 she established the first ever Survivors' Annual Support Groups Conference, held in Sendai, Japan bringing a small group of survivors together for the very first time. For this year she greatly expanded the conference bringing survivors together from all over the country, getting funding from the Nippon Foundation to run a much larger event, and bringing in academicians to present at the conference, (besides the regular conference theme of having survivors publicly share their loss stories). This year's conference included Dr. Tomofumi Oka, a Professor of Social Work at Sophia University, an expert on Japanese self-help groups. We were also honored to be included on this program because of a co-authored article we wrote on the healing potential of survivor support groups (*Illness, Crisis and Loss*, 2008, Vol. 16, No. 4, pp. 285-304).

This year's conference appeared to be a resounding success with close to 100 attendees, consisting of survivors from all over Japan, and a small mixture of mental health professionals, suicide prevention experts and news media personnel attending. What was so special about this year's conference was the newly emerging spirit of cooperation and collegiality that is now appearing between mental health professionals and survivors. Before this year's conference mental health professionals and government officials had little respect and appreciation for survivor self-help group efforts. While survivors knew their groups greatly helped them to better accept their losses, the professionals never shared this idea. Now, a new mood appears to be taking hold.

Thanks to the availability of a professional translator, Maejima Tsuneo, himself a three months survivor of his 28 year-old daughter's suicide, we were able to follow the Japanese language presentations both at the conference itself and at a survivors' meeting we attended on the night before the conference. Hearing survivors publicly express their losses and seeing them share their tears in the initial go around are indeed powerful unifying events, giving comfort and connection to many. The detailed loss stories shared at the conference showed that cultural differences doesn't count for very much in blunting the emotional impact of loss as it may be experienced both in Japan and in the US. At the conference we heard one father report on the sorrowful experiences of losing two teen-age daughters to suicide, two years apart, who both died by jumping from the same balcony. Both daughters appeared to face similar circumstances of confronting peer harassment at their local schools coupled with worsening personal histories of mental health problems. Another mother reported on the loss of her 31 year-old son who died by carbon monoxide poisoning after a long undetected bout of depression, and her post-traumatic amnesia during her first years after loss. Sharing our stories together--wherever we may be-- are helpful first steps toward bringing us back to higher levels of functioning.